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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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POSTURE TOWARD THE PLO

Statement of the Issue

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is the one major political force possessing the ability to affect a number of key US interests in today's Middle East with which the US -- as a matter of policy -- has no significant direct relationship. Since most Palestinians regard the PLO as the one force embodying Palestinian national aspirations, the issue faced by the US has been how to reconcile a US posture toward the PLO of non-recognition and non-communication with the need to convince the Palestinian people that the US is not their enemy and sincerely seeks a fair resolution of the Palestinian problem. The issue is complicated by the involvement of elements of the PLO in terrorist activities.

Growth in "Acceptance" of the PLO. Attempts to prevent establishment of the PLO as a major political factor in the Middle East have not been successful:

- As an organization, the PLO is today broadly recognized by Palestinians as the entity which embodies Palestinian nationalist aspirations, in part because there is no effective rival Palestinian leadership and in part because Fatah, the PLO's dominant element, endorses no particular economic or political ideology other than the simplistic one of recovery of Palestine. The PLO is an umbrella organization with many factions and groups that are often divided by dissent and disagreement. Fatah has a large, heavily armed military organization. Smaller Fedayeen groups -- some controlled by governments -- tend to be even more militant and employ terrorism as virtually their exclusive policy.

Recognized as the sole spokesman for Palestinian interests by the Arab summit in 1974, the PLO has achieved recognition by virtually all the Third World and Communist countries. More recently an increasing number of European governments have established communications with the PLO, although few have explicitly accepted the PLO claim to exclusive leadership of the Palestinians.

PLO Influence. Concurrently, the PLO demonstrated a growing capacity to affect and complicate US interests more broadly in the region and in international fora:

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- On the peace process, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who might be inclined to associate themselves with a peace process that they regarded as promising would be inhibited from doing so by PLO opposition. PLO acquiescence in -- if not formal agreement with -- what we are attempting to do is essential if representative Palestinians are to be brought on board.
- In Lebanon, the PLO, at the head of a Palestinian population in excess of 400,000, has the ability to exert influence over the fate of that nation and over US ability to achieve vital policy objectives in that country.
- In the Persian Gulf, under pressure of the large Palestinian population the Saudis and other Arab leaders see resolution of the Palestinian issue linked to the stability of their regimes and the region. These regimes oppose Camp David in part because they do not believe Egypt can negotiate for the Palestinians. They regard the PLO as the only valid representative of the Palestinians and regard US willingness to deal with the PLO as an indicator of US ability to pursue an equitable solution to the Palestinian issue, which they regard as essential to close cooperation with Washington.
- In the UN and other international bodies where the PLO has membership or observer status, the organization has demonstrated an increasing capacity to ensure that Palestinian issues are placed prominently on the agendas and to organize overwhelming majorities to vote in favor of them.

The PLO and Terrorism. Various groupings under the PLO undertake terrorist actions, internationally as well as against targets in Israel and the occupied territories. Assassinations and intimidation are also practiced against Palestinians and Arabs, particularly in the occupied territories and Lebanon. Fatah, the dominant element, has cut back international terrorism in recent years, but not against Israel. Other groups are virtually unrestrained. Terrorism under the PLO guise has dominated Israeli policy toward the Palestinian issue and has brought about its heavy involvement in Lebanon and pre-emptive military strike strategy.

Time Constraints.

There is nothing in the present situation which will require an early policy decision on this issue. However, from the outset of the Administration, all parties in the Middle East and key elements in Congress and the American public will scrutinize Administration

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statements and decisions regarding the PLO and the Palestinian problem for hints about the Administration's approach to this issue. Israel will be seeking assurances that our 1975 pledge about dealing with the PLO stands and that the new Administration will enforce it no less stringently than its predecessor. Moderate Arabs and many of our Western allies -- at a minimum -- will be hoping for evidence that the new Administration is not tying its hands and that it is leaving open greater opportunity for accommodation to the PLO's predominant influence within the Palestinian movement. More broadly, the strategy formulated on the Arab-Israeli issue toward the PLO and toward Palestinian objectives such as "self-determination" and an independent Palestinian state. That posture, will, in part, determine whether the peace process can be broadened to include Palestinians.

What We are Doing and Why

Since 1975 the United States has taken the position that it will not recognize or negotiate with the PLO so long as the PLO does not accept UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and Israel's right to exist. This position, one of the commitments we made to Israel as part of the second Sinai disengagement agreement in 1975, has been interpreted in recent years to preclude all US official contact with PLO officials with two exceptions:

- US posts abroad and our mission to the UN in New York perform, as appropriate, routine administrative and consular functions for PLO officials proceeding to the UN on official business; and
- the US Embassy in Beirut, for the safety of US personnel in Lebanon, has maintained security-related contacts with PLO officials first authorized and publicly acknowledged by the Ford Administration in 1976.

An attempt in 1977 by intermediaries to work out a formula under which the PLO would accept UNSC Resolution 242 with appropriate reservations regarding its characterization of the Palestine issue did not produce any result.

At Camp David, agreement was reached that negotiations would begin to provide full autonomy for the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza and that they -- rather than the PLO -- could be represented in the negotiations. To date, however, they have not been willing to participate.

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